

## Mike Abrashoff

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At the age of 36, Mike Abrashoff was selected to become Commander of *U.S.S. Benfold*, at the time he was the most junior commanding officer in the Pacific Fleet. The challenges were staggering with exceptionally low morale and unacceptably high turnover.

Few thought that this ship could improve, but Mike only became more resolved. In some ways, it is an extreme example of the same problems facing many organizations today. “In my induction ceremony, my predecessor left to cheers. They were actually clapping. I knew then that command and control leadership was dead.”

“A lot of people do whatever it takes to secure the next promotion. All I ever wanted to do in the navy was to command a ship. I did not care if I ever got promoted again. And that attitude enabled me to do the right things for my people instead of doing the right things for my career. Along the way, it was my people that created the results that ensured my next promotion.”

The solution was a system of beliefs that Mike calls GrassRoots Leadership. A process of replacing command and control with commitment and cohesion, by engaging the hearts, minds, and loyalties of workers – a belief that Mike achieves with conviction and humility. “The most important thing that a captain can do is to see the ship through the eyes of the crew.” This meant interviewing every single person on his ship, from the most senior officer to the lowest recruit. It was an experience that began to generate invaluable ideas, often from unexpected sources.

For example, through one of these meetings, Mike was able to address one of the most demoralizing roles of the crew. Relentless chipping and painting had always been a standard task for a ship’s youngest sailors, the individuals that Mike most wanted to connect with. One of these sailors simply suggested replacing the rusting hardware with stainless-steel nuts and bolts. “I took our credit card and bought the stainless steel hardware that day,” Mike commented, “The kids haven’t picked up a paintbrush since.” Today, the entire Navy uses that process - a solution that began from GrassRoots efforts.

GrassRoots leadership is a principle that empowers every individual to share the responsibility of achieving excellence. “It’s your ship,” Mike was known to say. To this day, his former sailors still remind him of it.

By every measure, these principles were able to achieve breakthrough results. Personnel turnover decreased to an unprecedented 1%. The rate of military promotions tripled, and operating expenses were slashed by 25%. The *U.S.S. Benfold* became regarded as the finest ship in the Pacific Fleet, winning the prestigious Spokane Trophy for having the highest degree of combat readiness.

Mike's leadership skills have been honed through a number of challenging roles. Prior to commanding *U.S.S. Benfold*, Mike served as the military assistant to the Secretary of Defense, the Honorable Dr. William J. Perry. In this demanding role, Mike accompanied the Secretary of Defense throughout the world on critical missions of national security.

Other experiences that have influenced Mike's leadership skills include helping to draft the air defense plan for naval forces in the Persian Gulf in 1990, coinciding with Iraq's invasion of Kuwait; and serving as the executive officer of the Cruiser Shiloh, where he traveled to the Persian Gulf in support of United Nations sanctions against Iraq.

Mike's book, *It's Your Ship*, is a fascinating tale of top-down change for anyone trying to navigate today's uncertain business seas. His most recent book, *Get Your Ship Together*, was released in January 2005.

Mike is originally from Altoona, Pennsylvania, and is a 1982 graduate of the Naval Academy of Annapolis. He currently lives in Virginia.